

Saturn:

Experiencing the Authority Within

(Part One of Three)

by Bill Herbst

The first version of this major essay about Saturn as an essential planetary archetype in astrology was written in 1985. Every archetype is meaningful, but Saturn is downright critical. The essay has been through various revisions over the past 38 years. I believe this repost started with the version that was edited in 2002 and subsequently published in The Mountain Astrologer. Since the essay is fairly long (14 pages), I post it here as three more bite-sized installments in my weekly blog commentary format.

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confronting our inner authority

Can you remember what it felt like to be a small child in a world of adults? Imagine that you are once again five years old. You're sitting at the dinner table with your parents, eating a typical American dinner of the 1950s, '60s, or even '70s: meat loaf, mashed potatoes with gravy, and canned peas. You've wolfed down your meat loaf, polished off your mashed potatoes, even dutifully drunk the mandatory glass of milk. All that remains are the peas. Yuk... Little green spheres with squishy centers, lots of them, sort of rolling around on your plate, like poison pellets. Double yuk.

You wouldn't eat them on a bet. It's not just that they're alien and strange-looking — the peas are almost frightening in some undefined way, and you're certain that if you eat them something bad will happen. You aren't sure exactly what will happen, but you know without a doubt in your five-year-old feelings that it won't be nice.

You ask to be excused from dinner, whereupon your father peruses the situation and off-handedly comments, "*I see you haven't eaten your peas.*"

"*No sir,*" you reply in that nasal whine five year-olds are so good at, "*they'll kill me if I eat them; they're poison.*"

"*Well,*" he says, "*they're not poison; they're good for you, and you'll probably learn to enjoy them if you try one or two bites.*" Then, in the nonchalant way many fathers have with their five-year-olds, he informs you that "*you will sit at*

the table until you have eaten at least some of those peas, my young friend," adding at the end in a subtly veiled threat, *"and you'll like them, too."*

So you're stuck. Trapped like a rat at the dinner table. You hate those God-awful peas, there's no question, and momentarily you hate your father for imprisoning you in this horrid situation, preventing your escape.

But what do you really hate? What are you really afraid of? Certainly not your father; he's only doing his job, being your father. And how can you hate the peas? Yes, they look queer, and green might not be your favorite color, but how can you hate them without ever having tried them?

The feelings of revulsion are quite real to you, but where did they come from? It's almost as if you'd eaten peas before and gotten sick, almost as if you'd tried to experience them in some invisible dimension of reality, only to suffer awful after-effects — waves of nausea, over and over and over. And now, even at the tender age of five, you remember the suffering of those awful experiences, the haunting pain of what feel like old wounds.

Each of us has a layer of oversensitivity existing from birth. It may precede birth, but astrology isn't a system that deals with prenatal metaphysics. Astrology focuses on the hard-wiring at birth and the evolution of that programming throughout life. What is revealed through Saturn in birth-charts is analogous to a DNA-code of Gordian knots or Sisyphean labors that find their way into the biochemical patterns of synapses, neurotransmitters, and hormones. When these patterns become associated with certain situations in real life, they powerfully conjure up the many images of entrapment, fear, inadequacy, humiliation, frustration, and failure contained within the collective zeitgeist of humankind.

Astrology holds that we are not blank slates at birth, coming into life fresh. We are definitely not, as the Declaration of Independence so confidently states, "created equal." While our conceptions might reflect a certain cosmological equality, we are certainly not *born* equal. We are specialized, highly individual beings with a unique relation in time and space to everything around us, including all the history of the universe. Considered from the viewpoint of certain metaphysical perspectives, we arrive as fully-developed spirits, pre-programmed with intricate and elegant predicaments.

This is not to say that life is no more than mechanical deism, no more magical than a simple playing-out of fated roles. Consciousness, we hope, is not mere machinery. Yes, there are limits to the logic of earthly life: plant an acorn and you get an oak tree. Not a fir, not an elm, not a birch. Plant an acorn and you get an oak. That much is given. But part of the freedom and wonder of it all, part of the ineffable magic of life, is in seeing what quality of oak might emerge from a particular acorn. What tree will grow from the seed? Will it be tall and straight and strong, or will it succumb to the myriad dangers of disease and debilitation in its environment that so often lie in ambush? What internal and

external forces cause one tree to wither while another prospers? Sometimes that's obvious, but other times it's very mysterious.

The dance of life goes on all round us, but the song itself resonates from within. And part of the song is fear and anxiety, however much we might wish it to be otherwise. Every single human being is born with his own particular melody of struggle, his own exceptional memory of tribulation. Fear has no perspective, and as we grow into our lives, any situation is capable of activating those memories, triggering an instant replay of our latent feelings of apprehension. This is the Catch-22, the Murphy's Law — if anything in an environment can scare you, it probably will. Even the innocuous experience of confrontation with a green vegetable can be terrifying.

enter saturn

In astrology these specialized memories are the realm of the planet Saturn. On the surface of the symbolism, it could be and is too often considered a "negative" archetype, revealing patterns of fear, anxiety, delay, frustration, restraint, inhibition, and numerous other concepts unpleasant to contemplate.

But Saturn represents not only the fear and anxiety woven into life's tapestry, not only the feelings of restraint and inhibition, but also the mechanisms within us for coping with those conditions. And that addition is crucial. While we may talk of Saturn as the planet of fear and restriction, we are not condemning it to negative status in astrology. Saturn reveals both the problem of anxiety and the eventual realization of a solution — at least a possible solution — through maturity. It is the path toward resolution of fear through gradual achievement, the long transmutation of the negative into the positive. It is the mundane condition of *attachment* and the spiritual power of *perseverance*.

Saturn's territory is specific. It pertains only to those anxieties we're somehow, almost perversely drawn toward, rather than the general categories of common sense avoidance, which might be termed disinterested fears. We don't throw ourselves off cliffs, because it would be stupid to do so. We walk through the mine-field of life constantly, stepping lightly around disaster at every turn, hardly giving the matter a thought. It's a wonder that we survive at all, but we do, and quite handily. We are unruffled by the presence of life's multitude of demons because we are disinterested in the vast majority of them. We are not attached to them, not sensitized to hysterical degrees. Most of life's routine difficulties lack the essential ingredient of a binder. They lack the power to compel our attention, to force our egos to recognize and feel the awesome anxiety they represent. Most dangers lack sufficient authority to really scare us. And that is one of the critical keys to fear: *authority*.

In our story, the authority is represented by the child's father, a man who has the size and power to command if not total respect, at least passive obedience. And in our individual lives the experience of Saturn is often connected to an external power figure, someone with whom we have a less-than-egalitarian relationship of impact and influence — someone who's got something over us,

someone we allow to dominate us. This relationship could be with an older brother or sister whom we admire, or perhaps with a schoolteacher or principal. It could be with a policeman or a lover or even a stranger, and could be projected onto any number of people in life, in reality, anyone in a position to wield over us the power of restriction. It's someone who can imprison us.

But most truly, the Saturn experience deals with the authority inside each of us. While most of us spend our lives projecting this authority outward, looking for it in others, it is finally a quality within. This *authority-within* shows us our limits, defines our work for us, and teaches about achieving slowly, one step at a time.

As a five-year-old, you are concerned only with the new and momentary experience of eating your peas. You're not thinking beyond that. On the contrary, you are probably not thinking at all; you're simply flowing with the current of instinct, feeling the urgency of the moment.

Your father, however, is thinking about the raising of his child. He's thinking that if he allows you to leave the table without eating any peas, he's setting up a habit pattern within his child that may have ramifications not only in the near future, but in the long run of adult life ahead. If he can convince you that peas are not poison, you may grow up to love vegetables rather than loathe them. In other words, he's considering the use of his authority over you in terms of your life as a whole, the richness of your experience through time. His actions are based on a broader perspective, an appreciation for longer-term ramifications.

This is not to suggest, however, that either father or child inevitably acts with intelligence and grace.

Being a child is difficult enough, but being an ideal parent is nearly Herculean. To always consider a child's ultimate welfare in rule-settings and enforcements is simply beyond the abilities of most parents. What father could honestly say that he has never once taken unfair advantage of the power he wields over his child? However well-loved they are, all children suffer occasionally from the fallibility of their parents.

Besides the issue of parental weakness, there is the question of how to impose discipline to best effect. Authority involves the creation of policy structures — rules, regulations, enforcement procedures, and the karma of specific, well-defined repercussions to any transgression of policy. The purpose of these structures is to both protect and guide those for whom one is responsible.

Although it can be argued that excessive permissiveness and lack of firm, consistent structures can be damaging to children, we have seen over the past century the tragic results of overly authoritarian approaches to parenting. Some fathers are simply not sensitive to their children's capacities to confront fear. Many a young child has been damaged by an introduction to water through the abrupt shock of a sink-or-swim technique. Authorities must balance the

importance of learning a lesson against the intensity of immediate anxiety, and this is no simple matter.

Conversely, a five year-old is not a "miniature adult." Parents cannot deal with the child as they would a person of social, ethical, and psychological sophistication. Speaking in terms of metaphysics, a given child may be a highly-evolved spirit from whom we see shining moments of great insight, wisdom, and maturity. But even the most exalted spiritual being would have trouble assimilating the awesome ego-forces routinely unleashed in human childhood, not to mention the fact that incarnating into a new human body requires an agony of remembering (re-learning). It is one thing to know the divine; it is quite another thing to go through toilet training. Can you imagine an enlightened spirit saying, *"If you make me eat those awful peas, I'll hold my breath until I turn blue — then you'll be sorry!"*

So, it's a two-way street. While parents do have their inevitable failings, even the most loving, sensitive, and considerate of fathers may be defeated by a child quick to resent or defy the authority imposed. Children are notoriously irrational in their short-term resistance.

The situation is symbolically the same in the "family" of roles and personalities contained within a single psyche. Judged from the astrological perspective, a person's authority-within may be over-zealous to imprint correct teachings, or insensitive to the ability of the ego to withstand the shock of confrontation with what it fears. Likewise, the ego may be inordinately stubborn in refusing to accept its dharmic responsibilities. To a large extent, the condition of Saturn in the natal chart reveals the characteristic tendencies each person has for these and many more specific difficulties that surround adjustment to the limits of time and space. But even with the information from astrology, there are some levels of this predicament that defy analysis and judgment.

Let's sum up what we've established thus far. For each of us, the Saturn experience symbolizes mental, emotional, and physical involvement in certain fears, vulnerabilities, or inadequacies we sense in ourselves and our worlds. These fears are revealed situationally by an authority-within, a component of the psyche that has a longer perspective on what our developmental work must be for us to achieve the wholeness of personality necessary for authentic fulfillment.

For the child in our story, that means he simply can't leave the table until he eats his peas. And that's only one manifestation among many. For each of us in real life, it means sensing which of our fears we are drawn back to again and again — in spite of our ego-insecurity — by an inner voice that "orders" us to confront the problem. These confrontations may appear unimportant to an objective observer, but for us they are peak experiences that involve the conquest of our anxiety and trepidation.

end Part One

Next week in Part Two of Saturn: Experiencing the Authority Within, we'll move into the child's strategies designed to allow escape from the predicament.